The Necessity of Engaging with Politics: Lessons from the Grassroots in India

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1 Introduction

In rural India, politics is often considered to be largely the preserve of politicians and their affiliates. With the devolution of powers to local government and the conduct of regular elections this perception is gradually changing. Increasingly, poor people are harnessing the potential of devolution by participating in various forms of political action (Alsop, Krishna and Sjoblom 2001; Bardhan, Mitra, Mookherjee and Sarkar 2009). Democratic decentralisation (constitutional amendment passed in 1992) is also providing NGOs at the grassroots with an opportunity to play a more explicit role in matters relating to politics and local government (Chhotray 2008).

This article unpacks the relationship of poor people and a grassroots-NGO with rural local government. It describes the growing engagement of vulnerable and marginalised people with politics in this context, and explains how greater political participation allows for more influence over the functioning of local government and the disbursement of material benefits from it. In doing so, it highlights that even those who are not keen or interested in such involvement now find that this engagement is becoming a necessity. The paper draws on material from my doctoral thesis which was a comparative study of the interface of gram panchayats, grassroots-NGOs and poor people in two south Indian states. This paper takes an in-depth look at the political dynamics and outcomes within one of the gram panchayats in the south Indian state of Karnataka.

I have used the term politics in three different senses. Firstly, I have used it in reference to institutional electoral practices. The two other senses in which I have used it relate to the additional ways in which gram panchayat-level informants interpreted these terms. In the more limited sense, it refers to competition between cliques. In the more substantive sense, it refers to the interplay of interests and forces that seek to control authority in village society in order to gain influence or retain command over decision-making, resources and benefits.

The article has four sub-sections. The next sub-section provides information about the research setting, methods and mode of analysis, together with reflections on the research process. The third sub-section unpacks the experiences in Donnapalli gram panchayat and discusses the findings. Finally, the conclusion highlights the key lessons.

2 Background and Details of the Research

2.1 The Context in Karnataka

Like many other societies in the world, rural society in India has been intertwined with the practise of politics – both in its institutional and substantive forms. In much of southern India, political power was traditionally concentrated in the hands of the village ‘headman’ who belonged to either an upper caste or a dominant caste, and also in a more limited sense with leaders from other caste/tribe and religious groupings (Mandlebaum 1970). Post-independence, the authority and influence (especially over panchayats) of the headman and other leaders is gradually eroding (Robinson 1989; Krishna 2007). This has in part been aided by the development and expansion of democratic institutions and practices. The constitutional amendment in 1992 which gave states the responsibility to devolve powers to local
government has further extended opportunities for vulnerable and marginalised people to take up leadership positions and influence the functioning of *panchayats* (Kudva 2006).

However, attempts at decentralisation have varied across the Indian states as their governments are free to determine the design, scope and extent of devolution of resources and power – provided they adhere to a set of uniform requirements. During the time period of my study (1994 to 2006), the south Indian state of Karnataka has made more efforts than many other states to strengthen local government. Both parties that headed governments during this term (the Congress and Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)]) have adopted a liberal, hands-off approach to *panchayats*; and have devolved a measure of funds and powers to them (Mathew and Buch 2000; Meenakshisundaram 2005). They have also been broadly supportive of NGO involvement in *panchayat*-related matters (Hansen 1999).

Although Karnataka scores over many other states in terms of political and administrative devolution; in terms of finances (*until* the 2003 amendments), and government officials’ accountability to these institutions, its efforts have been inadequate. However, the change in financial allocations in 2003 has meant that Karnataka’s *gram panchayats* now receive about 50 percent of the total transfers compared to the two upper tiers.

2.2 Chickballapur District and NGO Akravati
This paper focuses on a *gram panchayat* located in Chickballapur district. This district is interior, backward, semi-arid and drought-prone with a high dependence on well (open and bore) irrigation. There are no major rivers, reservoirs or canals within the districts. The economy is primarily agrarian and the dominant mode is rain-fed agriculture. Within village society, the traditionally powerful community are the Vokkaligas – a dominant caste. They are a peasant farming caste that belongs to the Shudra *varna* (category). However, since families within these caste groupings are often landed and have significant traditional influence in the village, they have a higher status compared to other castes that fall within the Shudra bracket.

Chickballapur has many small NGOs that work on a variety of rural development issues but some are run by fly-by-night operators or are financed by local political leaders. Most of the ‘credible’ NGOs work on service delivery issues. This paper examines the role of a large, long-established NGO called Akravati that works with poor people in rural areas through the multi-pronged approach of conscientisation, mobilisation, and service delivery. It has been working on issues relating to *panchayats* from the late 1980s. Akravati works in about 900 habitations covering four different legislative constituencies (linked to the state government’s Lower House of directly elected representatives). The NGO is a formal (with salaried employees), mainly donor-funded (international) collective. It operates through a *sangha* (membership-based village group facilitated by the NGO) which is a federation and a separate legal entity. The *sangha* is largely made up of daily-wage labour families, many of whom are from the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). There is a close link between the NGO and the *sangha* as more than half of the NGO staff are drawn from it. With respect to local government, Akravati has disseminated information, mobilised *sangha* members to contest seats and make demands on the *panchayats*, and provided training on related issues.

The political contest in this district is mainly between the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] and the Congress party. All tiers of elections display a high degree of political competition with increasingly narrow margins of victory. Aside from the three-tiered *panchayats*, the district is carved into five different legislative constituencies. Each member
or MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) is associated with a single-member legislative constituency at the sub-district level and is elected for a period of five years. MLAs command significant influence over the local bureaucracy as they have powers to orchestrate transfers of government officials within their constituency, especially the Executive Officer (EO) – the senior-most official of the taluk panchayat (the intermediate tier), and gram panchayat secretaries.

2.3 Maddilpalli Legislative Constituency
Donnapalli, the gram panchayat under study is located in Maddilpalli legislative constituency. Here, the same CPM leader (male, Vokkaliga) was an MLA in both the 1994 and 2004 term whereas the independent (rebel Congress) candidate (male, Baljiga) was an MLA in 1999. Aside from differing political party affiliations, the difference in caste between the two main contestants has contributed to a degree of caste polarisation in assembly elections. In addition, whereas the CPM leader’s term is normally associated with a heightened degree of tension in the villages, brow-beating of the bureaucracy and clear party favouritism in awarding ‘contracts’ and benefits; the rebel Congress candidate’s term is considered to be more relaxed, non-intrusive and accommodative. In part, this is because the latter’s support base is partially made up of sangha members associated with NGO Akravati. So, when he has been in power, the senior leaders of the sangha together with the senior management of the NGO are able to exert some amount of pressure on him to ensure that their members benefit from panchayats and that there is no wilful obstruction on his part.

However, this open support to the rebel-Congress candidate has driven a wedge between the CPM MLA and the sangha supporters. During the study time-period, the political party-in-power in the taluk panchayat in Maddilpalli has often been at odds with the ruling MLA. This ‘opposition’ has ensured that no party is able to completely dominate the political scene, and spoils and benefits are distributed to supporters across the divide. However, this has not always translated into positive gains for marginalised and vulnerable citizens, but it has allowed for some continuity in policy. Although both the MLA and the intermediate panchayat members have tried to channel benefits to their vote bases, they have often been thwarted by intra-party politics and local village dynamics. In addition, the rotation of reservations for the post of chairpersons in taluk panchayats (every 20 months within a five year term) has increased opportunities for defections, generating further instability in planning and implementing panchayat policies.

2.4 Research Methods and Reflections

2.4.1 Methodology and Assessment
In order to evaluate the experiences of poor people in Donnapalli gram panchayat, I use both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data is drawn from semi-structured interviews and participant observation, and provides an understanding of the context and changing dynamics. The quantitative data compares responses of survey respondents (20 poor people) across 20 key questions. The experiences are assessed by focusing on the level of political participation and material benefits attained at a point in time: 2005 to 2006.

The first dimension is evaluated by examining achievements with respect to 1) the awareness of poor people in relation to different aspects of PRI-related political participation, 2) the physical practices associated with this political participation (voting, contacting elected representatives, petitioning and protesting), and 3) the effectiveness of this political participation - assessing whether the active utilisation of voice has helped to shape the dynamics within the panchayat or the decisions and practices of individuals (citizens, elected...
functionaries, leaders and officials) and groups. In other words, I assess the awareness, voice and influence of poor people.

The second dimension relates to the acquisition of panchayat-related material benefits – both individual and community. I primarily examine benefits that are provided by the lowest tier of panchayats. Individual benefits include houses, pensions and daily-wage labour on various employment projects. Collective benefits include the provision of roads, potable water facilities and street lights.

Aside from collecting data at the gram panchayat level, I also conducted interviews with key informants at the intermediate panchayat, district panchayat and state level. In addition, I analysed information available on web and print media. Data from these different avenues helped to provide a detailed and balanced picture of the dynamics and outcomes at the grassroots. In the next sub-section, I reflect on my experiences while conducting fieldwork and analysing data. These reflections help to situate the findings in section 3.

2.4.2 Reflections on Fieldwork and Data Analysis

During my time in the habitations, I lived in the houses of poor people (mainly sangha members). It was important to situate myself in the village, not only to get a more authentic flavour of the everyday experiences of citizens but also for reasons relating to data collection. Poor people (invariably, daily-wage labourers) would be out on work during the day, and political leaders would be accessible mostly in the late evenings and early mornings.

I speak the local language Telugu, so it was smoother to run interviews and interpret discussions. In general, there was generous cooperation from the interviewees, but there were some instances when people were suspicious about participating or unsure about responding. Some respondents gave politically correct answers, or under-reported, or made inflated claims. A few of the respondents, like well-known political leaders or senior NGO staff, were seasoned interviewees. In order to get reliable data, I had to be careful about how I worded my questions and steered the course of the interview. I also had to factor in the positionality of interviewees themselves. So, to reduce biases, I informally ascertained the political leanings and reliability of potential interviewees (wherever possible). To minimise ‘recall’ related biases, I provided a point of reference or memory-aid by mentioning a significant event or individual from the particular period or year.

Government staff and elected functionaries at the gram panchayat level were often reticent about sharing minutes, audit reports, baseline data, muster rolls and financial information in relation to panchayats. In many cases, the problem of paucity of information was compounded by the fact that the available material was outdated, missing, ‘lost’, inaccurate, doctored, inconsistent, insufficient or incomplete. So, I was cautious in my use of secondary sources of information. These limitations reinforced the importance of conducting semi-structured interviews. Similarly, obtaining secondary sources of information from the NGO under study had to be carefully negotiated, and was often contingent on the quality of my personal rapport with senior staff.

During fieldwork, I was aware that my own positionality of being a young, urban, middle-class, educated, married Indian woman, singly researching politically-sensitive issues, would affect the research process. At the same time, being an ‘urban woman student’ had its advantages at the habitation level, in that it had afforded greater in camera access to other women while also allowing fairly open access to interviews with men.
While analysing data and writing up findings, I was mindful that my own values, preconceptions, and assumptions could influence the findings of the research. In particular, my ‘interpretation’ of data relating to people’s perception on issues relating to poverty, politics and change would be affected by my own ‘theoretical, political and personal concerns’ (Booth, Leach and Tierney 2006: 3). These concerns had the potential to both enrich and bias findings, and so it was often hard to strike the right balance.

The use of mixed-methods helped to triangulate data analysis. The initial focus was on identifying trends in the quantitative data, and the qualitative data was used to explain, enrich, moderate, qualify, corroborate and question some of the survey findings. At other times, both the qualitative and quantitative data provided different opportunities for exploring contradictions and complementarities.

One of the key findings that this research process was able to highlight was the growing role of politics in the everyday lives of poor people. In the next sub-section, I describe how politics plays a critical role in their lives in relation to participating in panchayat-related activities and accessing material benefits.

3 Unpacking Experiences in Donnapalli Gram Panchayat

3.1 The Growing Relationship with Politics (1994-2006)

Donnapalli is a remote gram panchayat that covers twelve habitations and 1260 households. NGO Akravati has been operating here since the early 1990s on a range of issues relating to rural development and democratisation. It works with small and poor peasant families in seven out of the twelve habitations, through the medium of sanghas.

This gram panchayat is the seat of a large landowning, dominant caste (Vokkaliga) family. It also has a sizeable concentration of Scheduled Caste and Schedule Tribe households. In the past, most of these families were under the ‘control’ of the big landowning family. NGO Akravati found it particularly hard to build a sangha in the main village where the most powerful members of the family live. Furthermore, it is located in a CPM stronghold, which has helped to ensure that intermediate and district panchayat members across all three terms were almost all CPM supporters. Despite this, at the gram panchayat level, there has been some support for the ‘Congress’ as a section of the ‘big’ family supports this political party.

The family had de facto control over the panchayat till the middle of the 2000 electoral term. They ensured that gram panchayat meetings and gram sabhas (village assemblies) were a sham, and they successfully curtailed the dispersion of material benefits to most poor people. Although members within this powerful family had different political party affiliations, the covert understanding was that power should remain within the family. So, in the 1994 gram panchayat term, when the reservation ‘category’ for the post of president was allotted to the SCs, an illiterate lady from this community was ‘installed’ as the president. However, the family faced more resistance in the next term.

In the first 30 months of the 2000 term, a male Scheduled Caste member was ‘elected’ as president. In the intervening period, the gram panchayat had witnessed the rise of many small-time leaders and political aspirants. The ‘big’ family was increasingly aware of the threat that these new leaders (some of whom were from marginalised castes, like the new Scheduled Caste president) posed to their traditional authority, and the difficulties of co-opting the more vociferous aspirants. This defiance had been evident in the more intense
contestation for ward member (panchayat council) seats between the two main political parties in the gram panchayat elections of 2000. In the 1994 elections, there were few contests and more unanimous ‘nominations’:

There was more interest in panchayat elections in the 2000 term. Contestants felt that being a ward member gave them access to material benefits and a chance to be a leader. And as for the voters, even people who would not normally vote felt that they could use their vote to bargain for some panchayat benefits (Elected male member, pers. comm. 2006).20

At the start of the next 30 months, when the ‘category’ was announced as ‘general’ (open to all communities), a young educated dominant caste man21 was ‘chosen’ as the new president. Unlike presidents of the past, this candidate was unwilling to toe the line, and gradually began to strike out on his own. He tried to build a base around the backward castes (part of the Shudra varna), and also channelled community and individual material benefits from the gram panchayat to the poorer families (across the caste-divide), including sangha households. Although he lacked support from the intermediate and district panchayat members (CPM supporters), the Congress-affiliated president was able to accumulate a sizeable amount of additional material resources for the gram panchayat from the Congress-affiliated MLA.

The dominant caste leader from the main village was highly displeased with this insubordination and tried to engineer a no-confidence motion against him by bribing Congress-affiliated ward members to defect to the opposition CPM, and ‘influencing’ the CPM-affiliated panchayat secretary (government official attached to the panchayat). The leader also received tacit support from the ex-MLA, who belonged to the CPM. At this stage, the young president turned for support to his new base amongst the backward castes and sangha members. In response, the sangha functionaries at the gram panchayat and taluk level, with the backing of the NGO, the ruling Congress MLA and taluk-level Congress leaders; called for a major strike on the day of the no-confidence motion.

On the day… about 2000 people from across the taluk came for a strike and prevented the opposition ward members from entering the gram panchayat office. Most of these people who came for the strike belonged to the sangha (Elected male member, pers. comm. 2006).22

It was this show of strength that changed the tide in favour of the sangha. By the time of the next gram panchayat elections in 2005, the sangha had expanded membership within Donnapalli.

Five years ago in the 2000 elections we realised that coverage of sangha members was less in the villages of the panchayat. So, in the last elections we made alliances with the neutral population and encouraged them to join the sangha and that is how we managed to win the necessary votes and get so many elected members this time. Also the rich, higher caste people like S___ Reddy are seeking alliances with us because of the strength of the group. This has positive benefits for us (Sangha functionary, pers. comm. 2006).23

Some of the poor people, who had been reluctant or indifferent to any engagement with panchayats, now saw the value and results of involvement and collective mobilisation. They could see that it could challenge the domination of traditional elites. More importantly, they
felt that in order to secure material benefits and influence over the panchayats they needed to participate in political actions:

We need politics for development. There is a difference between asking someone else and getting things ourselves. For so long, we have had to approach B ___ (dominant caste leader) for anything related to panchayats. So we joined the sangha because we thought that as a group we could bargain better and have more control over the running of the panchayat. We don’t really want to get involved in politics but we have to because all of the decisions are being made on the basis of political party affiliations. Also, the gram panchayat is getting more funds, so poor families like us need to be able to influence its functioning if we want to get access to benefits (Key informant, pers. comm. 2006).”

After the 2005 panchayat election, the sangha functionaries negotiated with the ward members, and local leaders (Congress supporters) to ensure that their sangha member, an illiterate female from the Shudra varna was elected as president. She has been able to channel benefits to poorer families, especially within the sangha; but has had to balance that with appeasing powerful Congress supporters within the panchayat. Placating these local leaders has become trickier with the increase in financial allocations to the gram panchayats, as they are eager to cash in on ‘contracts’. Although sangha members are trying to ensure that the new president remains accountable to them, there is already evidence that cracks are developing in this relationship.

The above description of the dynamics in Donnapalli panchayat highlights the growing role, relevance and practice of politics in the lives of poor people. Aside from voting and having a general awareness about panchayats, they are also campaigning in elections, voicing demands, mobilising in groups and taking part in confrontational action. This is borne out in the survey findings too. Most respondents are aware about the basic role and functions of panchayats and have made some demands. Those that are members of the sangha have shown more interest than others in participating in campaigning, mobilising and protests. Individual demands for daily-wage labour, houses and pensions have not always been met, but they have had more success with the provision of collective benefits like potable water and roads. In addition, the qualitative data indicates that sangha mobilisation has made a difference in terms of members gaining priority in the distribution of individual benefits. Their petitions and campaigns have also helped to secure the provision of collective benefits like potable drinking water.

The account of Donnapalli also brings out the NGO’s role in building the political capabilities of sangha members. Akravati has been able to mobilise them to make demands, participate in protests and strikes, contest elections, and capture a sizeable share of the seats so that they can influence decision-making within the gram panchayat. In order to do that it has disseminated relevant information, trained sangha functionaries, and networked with various political leaders and government officials. Thus, working on panchayat-related issues has necessitated greater involvement in political matters. At times, this has led to confrontations with various leaders and groups whose interests have been affected by the growing awareness and strength of sangha members and their supporters. The NGO has dealt with any threats of violence and reprisal by drawing on the support of sangha members, lawyers, and officials and politicians at higher levels of government.

At the village level in Donnapalli, sangha members have had to balance considerations of employment and family, while voicing demands and participating in confrontational action.
In some cases, village-level leaders affiliated to the CPM have tried to co-opt sangha functionaries or intimidate their families. NGO staff feel that this tension and antagonism is part of the process of redefining traditional boundaries and bringing about change:

*Sangha* functionaries and members have to reconfigure existing power-relationships at the grassroots themselves. This is a slow process and it can have many setbacks. We can provide support from the outside through training, campaigns and legal-aid but the battle is primarily theirs (NGO head, pers. comm. 2005).²⁵

In the next sub-section, I elaborate on these viewpoints and findings, and highlight the links between politics and poor people in relation to local government institutions.

### 3.2 Discussing and Situating Findings

Over the study time period, the augmentation of powers and funds to *panchayats* has helped to usher in greater political competition and incremental social change in Donnapalli. Although the main dominant caste family still wields some power on the social and economic fronts, their command over local politics has suffered a serious blow. Earlier, they dictated the terms but now control has shifted to a wider group. The leader from the family has to bargain and compete with *sangha* and other political party leaders from traditional lower castes in order to influence decision-making within the *gram panchayat*:

*After this system of elections, things have changed completely. Now people don’t listen to B____. Now there is no unity in village. In the past there was just one leader. For justice they might still come to me for a decision, or rather a group of us. But we don’t have much say as far as politics is concerned* (Key informant, pers. comm. 2006).²⁶

This rise in political competition and the representation of leadership from non-traditional groups at the grassroots has also been documented in recent scholarship. Chandrashekhar (2009) and Mullen (2011) draw on village-level data to highlight the role of political competition in the context of democratic decentralisation. Alm (2010) draws attention to the emergence of leaders from non-traditional backgrounds, and Jha, Vaishnava and Bandyopadhyay (2011) document the role of ‘citizen leaders’.

In Donnapalli *panchayat*, this changing nature of local-level leadership and political competition reflects the growing relevance of politics in the everyday lives of its people. *Sangha* members, most of whom are poor and from the Scheduled Castes, have realised that harnessing the economic potential of *panchayats* requires a substantive engagement with politics – not just as individuals but more importantly as a group. Although they have had limited success in terms of securing individual benefits, their protests and petitions have led to the provision of certain collective material benefits. As one of the *sangha* functionaries explains:

*The reason why we decided to have politics as an integral part of *sangha* was to get benefits from government and without having to bend over backwards begging someone to get benefits for us. *Panchayats* and *sanghas* are both needed... *Sanghas* give us identity and collective power... [but] some things *sanghas* cannot give us like hostel seats, houses, water supply, and street lights* (*Sangha* functionary, pers. comm. 2006).²⁷

The benefits of engaging in collective mobilisation with respect to local government institutions has been brought out in Sharma and Sudarshan’s study of women’s groups in
north India (2010). The ability of these traditionally marginalised groups to participate more effectively in panchayats through such an engagement is similar to the collective pressure exerted by the sangha in Donnapalli. The sangha has also recognised that more substantive political participation in panchayats requires going beyond gaining awareness and exercising voice to actually influencing the functioning of the panchayat. As a group, the sangha have attempted to do that by capturing a majority of the seats in the council. They have tried to expand membership within the panchayat, and form alliances with groups and leaders from different castes and economic backgrounds. However, these alliances have made it difficult for the panchayat president in the 2005 term (who is a sangha member) to make unbiased decisions about the distribution of material benefits as she has had to conciliate local leaders who wish to make money on contracts.

On the other hand, the alliances have helped sangha members win positions as ward members, and reduced election costs for contestants from within the sangha when compared to those who are associated with a political party. This has made it more possible for sangha members from vulnerable and marginalised backgrounds to stand for elections. At the same time, the intense competition for ward member seats has led to more political tension and divisions within the panchayat. This has had knock-on effects on the sangha too. It has made it easier for local political leaders from the CPM to co-opt some of its leaders and exploit existing divisions within the group. However, sangha functionaries feel that this process of weeding-out weak leaders and individuals plays an important part in securing the unity of the group in the long run.

These links between the sangha and panchayats bring out the growing relevance of politics in the everyday lives of poor people. While these links have helped them secure a degree of material benefits from local government bodies, they are also creating new tensions within the sangha, which in turn can damage its unity and strength. These findings echo recent work by Govinda (2009) that unpacks the trade-offs when NGOs try to mobilise their target groups, and Mullen (2011) which examines the potential of panchayats for citizens and organised groups.

In Donnapalli panchayat, NGO Akravati has played an important role in building the awareness of sangha members and mobilising them to raise collective demands. They have provided information, strategies, training, technical and logistic support in relation to panchayats. Akravati has also supplemented the efforts of the sangha by liaising with government officials, the MLA and other political leaders at different tiers of government. This has augmented the voice and influence of sangha members as it has helped to step-up the pressure on leaders, elected functionaries and officials, both within and outside the panchayat. Given the hierarchical nature of village society, Akravati considers the involvement of its sangha members in electoral activities and confrontational collective action as a necessary step towards empowerment of poor people:

For us, politics is about securing access to state resources. We are building the capacities of sangha members so that they can do this. The sangha is not vying for power; it is trying to usher in a democratic culture whereby voter interest is supreme…empowerment of the traditionally marginalised has absolutely no meaning without electoral involvement (NGO head, pers. comm. 2005).28

Akravati has found that over time, with the increasing political competition at the grassroots and the institutionalisation of panchayats, it has had to adapt and strengthen its involvement in panchayat-related activities. However, its awareness-raising and mobilisation measures
have brought it into conflict with certain local political leaders and groups whose interests have been threatened. While this has not resulted in any serious setbacks, it has meant that at times field staff (many of whom are sangha members) have had to operate prudently. In addition, the NGO has found that their efforts to build the political capabilities of sangha members have been thwarted by internal village and party politics or by deliberate divisive measures undertaken by those who oppose the sangha. Senior staff are unperturbed as they feel that these tensions and impediments are part of the process of building the capabilities of vulnerable and marginalised people.

These differing experiences of Akravati provide an insight into the achievements, challenges and limitations faced by an NGO that chooses to conscientise and mobilise its target group in relation to panchayats. They build on existing literature (Chhotray 2008) and also support one of the key arguments of this paper that politics plays an increasingly important role in poor people’s interactions with panchayats.

In Donnapalli, poor people who are non-sangha members are also recognising the value of engaging in political participation. With the incremental devolution of powers and funds to gram panchayats, and the growing politicisation in village society, they feel that even if they were indifferent or reluctant in the past, they now need to participate in political activities, especially if they want to secure material benefits from panchayats. Some of those who have contacted elected functionaries, submitted petitions or joined protests have found that these different forms of political participation have enabled them to voice their demands more effectively. Others have found that voting collectively as a group has placed them in a better bargaining position, especially in their dealings with traditional elites.

This perception that political participation is becoming necessary has helped the sangha expand membership among poor people in Donnapalli. In turn, this has allowed vulnerable and marginalised people to have a larger influence over the gram panchayat election results, and hence potentially more say over decision-making and the disbursement of material benefits.

By discussing the engagement of poor people, NGOs and panchayats in Donnapalli, this article provides insights into the meanings and practices of citizenship in an arena where democratic decentralisation has made some inroads and where an organised group has used their collective strength to deepen political participation. In doing so, it builds on existing literature (Coelho and Von Lieres, 2010) by providing fresh insights to political dynamics at the grassroots in India.

I concur with Holsten (2008) that contextual differences need to be taken into account in order to understand the different ways in which poor people exercise citizenship. In a setting like Donnapalli, poor people are using the statutory provisions of local government, combined with the information and support provided by a local NGO to contact, petition and agitate for individual and collective benefits. Those that belong to the sangha are utilising collective mobilisation, electoral tactics and party politics to secure incremental gains. As Cornwall, Robins and Von Lieres suggest:

The new architectures of governance that have emerged as a result of these efforts to promote democratisation has given rise to a complex new landscape for citizen participation. New forms of public engagement are redefining citizenship and creating new political identities through which people come to participate (2011: 08-09).
In Donnapalli, the *sangha* and its members are helping to both redefine and set the terms on which vulnerable and marginalised people engage with local government. Although, the *panchayat* president nominated by them is finding it hard to balance different interests and the *sangha* is facing threats to its unity, the political alliances and strategies of the *sangha* are making it a force to be reckoned with.

**4 Conclusion**

The longitudinal account of the changing dynamics in Donnapalli *gram panchayat* has drawn attention to the links between poor people, NGOs and politics. It has described how *panchayats* can be harnessed to usher in political change at the grassroots. The constitutional amendment in 1992, the incremental devolution of funds and powers in Karnataka, and the presence of an NGO working on *panchayat*-related issues have helped to provide an enabling environment in which poor people can engage in substantive political participation. The article has shown that in such a context, an active engagement in different aspects of political participation can help vulnerable and marginalised people to have a larger influence over the functioning of local government and greater access to material benefits. In doing so, it has contributed and extended the literature on democratic decentralisation, NGOs and the ‘politics of citizen participation in new democratic arenas’ (Cornwall and Coelho 2006).

The deepening politicisation in rural arenas and the devolution of funds is making more poor people consider such an engagement as necessary. However, such an involvement might heighten existing tensions and deepen political divisions. Further research is required to examine the extent and relevance of these findings in other settings.

These findings take on significance in the light of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of 2005. The Act was implemented in 2006 and guarantees a minimum of 100 days wage-employment in a financial year to a rural household. Of the three tiers of local government, the *gram panchayats* now receive a sizeable proportion of the funds. In 2012 the government has passed an ordinance to further enhance the supremacy of the lowest tier. They have been given the power to take up any work in their jurisdiction on the basis of the decision arrived at in the *gram sabha* (village assembly). Thus, poor people who engage more deeply in political participation now have the opportunity to also influence the nature of the work undertaken. However, as the experience of Donnapalli suggests, greater financial allocations to the *gram panchayat* attract small-time leaders who are eager to make money on contracts for implementing works. Although contracts are not allowed under MGNREGA, there are other ways and programmes in which leaders (including those within groups like the *sangha*) and elected functionaries can indulge in petty corruption.

The growing authority of the *gram panchayat* also draws attention to the need for NGOs to work with their target group on *panchayat*-related issues. The article brings out the importance of the role of NGOs in relation to local government. In particular, it highlights the value of investing efforts in building a collective and nurturing the political capabilities of the group. The NGO can build their awareness about various aspects of *panchayats*, help them exercise voice, and support them in their endeavours to undertake collective confrontational action and secure an influential role in local government. Groups of vulnerable and marginalised people, like those in the *sangha* can help to make the decision-making process within *panchayats* more transparent, but even they are susceptible to political machinations and subject to internal divisions.
Despite these challenges, the account of Donnapalli shows us that both poor people and NGOs can benefit from a greater involvement with panchayats. Furthermore, with the deepening politicisation at the grassroots and the passage of the MGNREGA, it has become increasingly necessary for poor people to engage in different aspects of political participation.

References


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Notes

1 In 1992, the 73rd constitutional amendment paved the way for the Indian system of three-tiered decentralised government within rural parts of an individual state – district (zilla panchayat), sub-district or intermediate (taluk panchayat in Karnataka) and village (gram panchayat).
The term *Panchayati Raj Institutions* (PRIs) includes all three tiers of *panchayats*. All references to ‘*panchayat*’ refer to the statutory *panchayats*.

2 NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) are defined here as ‘self-governing, private, not-for-profit organisations that are geared to improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people’ (Vakil 1997: 2060). This definition places emphasis on the ‘developmental’ role of NGOs and excludes organisations such as ‘business, professional, recreational, cultural and strictly religious organisations that are usually considered as part of the non-profit sector’ (Ibid).

3 I define these as NGOs that operate in a specific geographical arena, namely - the sub-district administrative division.

4 This characterisation draws on Manor’s description of politics as “the interplay of interests and forces in pursuit of power, resources, status etc.” (2004: 205).

5 The traditional four-fold hierarchy consists of four *varnas* (categories): Brahmin (priest), Kshatriya (warrior), Vaishya (merchant) and Shudras (peasant, service and artisan castes). ‘Upper castes’ normally refers to castes belonging to the first three *varnas*.

6 Following Srinivas, ‘dominant’ is understood to refer to castes that control a substantial portion of landholdings associated with the village, have a sizeable (does not imply majority) numerical strength within the village that translates into socio-economic standing and control over political patronage, possess the hereditary headman’s post, and enjoy a relatively ‘high’ status within the traditional caste hierarchy (1959).

7 The period covers two full five-year electoral terms of *gram panchayats* and one year of the third electoral term.

8 This district was part of Kolar district during the study. In 2007, Kolar was bifurcated and this *panchayat* became part of Chickballapur district.

9 Names of NGO, legislative constituency, *gram panchayat*, and key people in this area have been altered.

10 Scheduled Castes (SCs) - (include the former untouchables or outcastes - castes which lie outside the traditional four-fold hierarchy) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) - (indigenous tribes) are accorded special constitutional status in view of the discrimination they have suffered in the past from mainstream Hindu society.

11 This is often shortened to CPM.

12 An influential caste grouping belonging to the Shudra *varna*.

13 Interviews with MLA, Akravati staff and functionaries of *sangha*, Kolar, 2006.

14 When selecting poor respondents for survey interviews I followed a three-stage strategy. Firstly, I collected information about a potential list of interviewees in a general group discussion. I then triangulated this information with key informants from both the well-off and poor categories. Finally, I did a round of the village and gauged their situation for myself. This information in tandem with research criteria helped me draw up the final list of respondents. I administered surveys to both *sangha* and *non-sangha* members (men and women). The majority of the respondents were from the Scheduled Caste community and were daily-wage labourers.

15 Telugu is the language associated with the state of Andhra Pradesh and Kannada is the language associated with Karnataka. However, the people in this legislative constituency within Karnataka largely speak Telugu as the area borders the state of Andhra Pradesh.

16 Elections for all three tiers of *panchayats* were held in 1994-1995, 2000 and 2005. The pattern of CPM dominance in the upper tiers was only broken in the 2005 term, when a *zilla panchayat* member from the Congress party got elected.
The Karnataka *Panchayati Raj* Act provides reservations for marginalised communities (women, religious minorities, SC/STs and backward castes) both for the post of ward member and GP president.

From 2000, *gram panchayat* terms in Karnataka are split into two equal halves. Reservations for the post of *panchayat* president are ‘rotated’ mid-way through the term allowing for two presidential tenures of 30 months each.

Karnataka has a system of indirect elections for the *gram panchayat* president, ward (council) members elect an appropriate candidate from amongst themselves, based on the reservation ‘category’. In practice, heavy contestation means that the largest number of like-minded ward members (invariably same political-party affiliation) has the final say in making this decision.

Interview with elected male member No. 39, 31 August 2006, Kolar.

Technically, he belongs to the same caste grouping as the landowning family but he comes from a lower class.

Interview with elected male member No. 38, 31 August 2006, Kolar.

Interview with *sangha* functionary No. 5, 26 August 2006, Kolar.

Interview with knowledgeable informant Number 48, 28 August 2006, Kolar.

Interview with NGO head, 12 October 2005, Kolar.

Interview with *sangha* functionary No. 5, 26 August 2006, Kolar.

Interview with NGO head, 12 October 2005, Kolar.